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Readings In a Sniper's Sight

PRESUMED GUILTY: Lee Harvey Oswald in the Assassination of President Kennedy. By Howard Roffman. A.S. Barnes; $8.95.

ACCESSORIES AFTER THE FACT: The Warren Commission, the Authorities and the Report. By Sylvia Meagher. Vintage/Random House; $5.95.

THE ASSASSINATIONS: Dallas and Beyond. Edited by Peter Dale Scott, Paul L. Hoch and Russell Stetler. Vintage/Random House; $15.00. $5.95.

Reviewed by James D. White

Three more books on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and its consequences reflect the persistent and growing doubt about the so-called solution to the crime that was served up in 1964 by the Warren Commission. Publishing interest is obvious in the fact that two of these books are reprints and the third an an anthology.

Howard Roffman's *Presumed Guilty* crystallizes the doubts about the Warren Report with a preface that opens with the simplicity of a thunderbolt:

> *Whoever killed President John F. Kennedy got away with it because the Warren Commission, the executive commission responsible for investigating the murder, engaged in a cover-up of the truth and issued a report that misrepresented or distorted almost every relevant fact about the crime. The Warren Commission, in turn, got away with disseminating falsehood and covering up because virtually every institution in our society that is supposed to make sure that the government works properly and honestly failed to function in the face of a profound challenge; the Congress, the law and the press all failed to do a single meaningful thing to correct the massive abuse committed by the Warren Commission. To anyone who understood these basic facts, and there were few who did, the frightening abuses of the Nixon administration that have come to be known as "Watergate" were not unexpected and were surprising only in their nature and degree.*

In one of the most moving books yet written about the assassination, Roffman stays within a simple theme: how the Warren Commission never considered any solution to the mystery of who killed Kennedy other than the one handed to it by the FBI — that Lee Harvey Oswald, supposed to be a Marxist, did it all by

himself. In accepting Oswald's guilt and ignoring or distorting its abundant evidence to the contrary, the Commission set itself upon a course which resulted in a massive, continuing deception that was by no means the first in American history but was, in Roffman's opinion, the most systematic, extensive and pervasive up to that time.

"A nation that did not learn from the Warren Commission," writes Roffman, "has survived to relive a far worse version of that past in Watergate."

Simply and clearly, he traces how the Commission and its staff, after deciding to consider nothing seriously except Oswald's presumed guilt, went on to make everything fit that pattern, either by ignoring or suppressing medical and ballistic evidence to the contrary or by misrepresenting it. Roffman contends that this same evidence, objectively examined, can lead only to the conclusion that "Lee Harvey Oswald never fired a shot at President Kennedy; he was not even at the Depository window during the assassination; and no one fired his rifle, the Mannlicher-Carcano, on that day."

". . . The official presumption of his guilt effectively cut off any quest for truth and led to the abandonment of the principles of law and honest investigation. At *all* costs, the government has denied (and, to judge from its record, will continue to deny) Oswald's innocence and perpetuated the myth of his lone guilt."

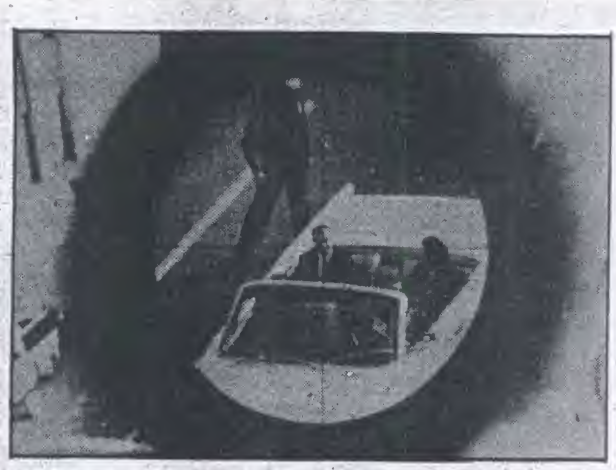

Exhibit 875 of the Warren Commission

"Oswald was framed," concludes Roffman bluntly. In framing him, he argues, the government tacitly sanctioned the real killers.

"A government that exculpates presidential assassins and denies an accused man his every right can not be trusted to protect its presidents or the rights of its citizens. With democratic government, if the President and the rights of the people are not safe, then all of society is threatened . . . ."

Remedies? "First and foremost," suggests Roffman, "the people must recognize they have been lied to . . . must demand the truth, whatever the price . . . ."

When *Presumed Guilty* was published in 1975 by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press it attracted little attention, got little or no promotion and was hard to obtain. It remains to be seen whether the reprint by a commercial publisher fares any better. The young author, meanwhile, has just finished his second year of law school at the University of Florida.

An equally important reprint is Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories After The Fact*, first published in 1967 by Bobbs-Merrill. The Vintage paperback re-issue by

Random House has been long overdue, as Peter Dale Scott explains in a new introduction, since the original hardback edition quietly sold out in three years and demand drove the price of second-hand copies up to $50 or more.

Accessories is among the few classics in the critical literature because the author, to put it simply, knew exactly what she was working with. After all, it was Mrs. Meagher who had done what the Warren Commission should have done and didn't — compiled a subject index to the Warren Report and its massive and jumbled 26 volumes of "evidence." In contrast with Roffman's sharply focussed analysis, her broader approach presents a relentlessly objective and encyclopedic survey of the contradictions between the Warren Report's conclusions and the evidence supposed to support them.

The Report, she writes in her foreword, "pronounces Oswald guilty"; the actual evidence, she continues icily, "instead of corroborating the verdict reached by the Warren Commission, creates a reasonable doubt of Oswald's guilt and even a powerful presumption of his complete innocence of all the crimes of which he was accused."

Much new material has been declassified since Mrs. Meagher's analysis was published in 1967, but its chief effect has been to reinforce the thrust of her conclusions.

The Assassinations: Dallas and Beyond is a compilation by three East Bay critics of selected documents and writings on the murder of President Kennedy plus some on the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. It is informatively edited and includes samples of counter-critical arguments. Especially for the newcomer, it conveys some feel of how the controversy has developed through the years.

Publication of this anthology in both hardcover and paperback editions along with the Meagher reprint would seem to represent a decision by Random House sometime last year at about the time Congressional committees began examining the activities, contemporaneous with the Warren Commission and since, of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These investigations on the Congressional level have produced headlines but little real action to curb the agencies being investigated. They also have turned up little new information of substance, except for details, that the critics have not known of and sought for years to learn more about.

All three books reviewed here represent the skeptical point of view which the Congressional and other official investigations have avoided as far as possible in areas where extensive disclosure would count. All three books also fit in well with the charges of an official cover-up levelled by Harold Weisberg in his last two books, *Whitewash IV* and *Post Mortem* (reviewed in May 1976 PSLQ) in which Weisberg uses declassified documents obtained through suits under the Freedom of Information Act to deliver a frontal attack on the official version of the Kennedy assassination.

The latest example of still another official probe skirting the issue of the Warren Commission is the recent report by the Senate Subcommittee on Intelligence Activities. This subcommittee, headed by Sen. Richard S. Schweiker (R-Pa.) was charged with looking into the JFK assassination and how the CIA and FBI investigated it for the Warren Commission. Its report charges that the CIA and FBI withheld vital information from the Warren Commission, including a series of CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro and an alleged retaliatory plot by Castro to kill Kennedy. This merely fills in details on reports of varying credibility the critics have been studying for years.

But unlike the critics, the Schweiker report concludes that this withholding of information is why the Warren Commission failed to function properly. It implies that the Commission could not help itself.

Both Weisberg and Roffman expose this as nonsense, citing declassified transcripts of the Commission's own executive sessions in 1964 which show awareness of the CIA and FBI withholding. Yet the Commission never used its subpoena power to obtain the withheld vital information, and it kept the withholding secret.

In effect, the Schweiker report upholds the Warren Commission if press accounts are correct: it accepts Oswald's guilt, excuses the Commission's failure to do its job by blaming the CIA and FBI, and muddies the whole scene by exhuming an ancient question about Oswald: if Oswald was part of a conspiracy, was that conspiracy pro-Castro or anti-Castro? This is a threadbare diversion because Oswald's alleged pro-Castro bent is one of the oldest dead-ends in the whole JFK mystery.

Repeatedly, Schweiker is overwhelmed by copious evidence that Oswald's real connections had far more to do with Cuban exiles and other right-wingers behind the cover of his pro-Castro pose. His actual orientation is more accurately indicated by the fact that he was the one and only member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee branch he "organized" in New Orleans, and which he promoted briefly from an office address shared with known right-wing operatives who were no strangers to intelligence backgrounds and connections.

By neglecting this aspect and emphasizing an alleged Castro plot to kill Kennedy, the Schweiker Report serves to shield the Warren Commission — of which President Ford was a member — to the extent that serious investigation is further delayed if not precluded in an election year.

James D. White, a former news agency reporter and editor, freelances in Marin County.